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AUTHOR Meers, Betty White
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ABSTRACT

Personality theory stresses the importance of communion with self to personal development. Since writing is a form of communion with self, researchers have begun looking for measurable differences in the personality development of writers and nonwriters. Several experiments have tended to confirm that writing has the potential to effect positive personality growth. There is also some experimental evidence that writing can be used as a therapeutic tool. Furthermore, just as studies have linked writing with personality growth and higher levels of identity status, a study has indicated that the obverse is also true: writing apprehension precludes the gains to be derived from communing with self through writing. (JL)

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Betty White Meers

Writing: Its Relationship to Ego Development

A major construct of personality theory is that of self-awareness, or self-knowledge; for it is only through self-knowledge that one may integrate his real self with his ideal or phenomenological self. Implicit in the concept of self-knowledge is some form of communion with self. Personality theorists have proposed a number of ways in which one may engage in self-communion. In recent years, researchers have begun exploring the potential of still another form of communion with self: writing.

Writing is a major activity in the academic setting, yet it is seldom evaluated in terms of its relationship to students' personality development. If writing is an effective means of communing with self, then there should be measurable differences betwen writers and non-writers. Research by Waterman and Archer (1979) found that students who engaged in poetry writing were more likely to be in identity achieved status than were non-poetry writing/journal keeping controls. Waterman and Archer theorized that the poetry writing fostered increasing self-awareness. They quoted one college student's comment: "When you try to write your thoughts down, you straighten them out and you realize something about yourself that you did not know before" (p. 339). This observation is confirmed by Probst (1982) who noted that "writing is the act of becoming a critical judge of one's own thinking and values" (p. 22) and by Green (1982), who admonished (with regard to problem-solving), "State the problem, even if it means you have to sit yourself in the corner and write."

This potential of writing for stimulating personal growth was investigated by Denman (1981). She reported significant favorable changes in California Psychological Inventory scores for a group of 18 composition students. According to Denman's

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findings, students who participated in a term of writing instruction in a humanistic setting not only improved their writing skills, but also reported experiencing "generalized personal growth and increased ability to function effectively" (p. 170). While acceptance of Denman's findings must be qualified because there was no control group, the study is worthy of replication with a more scientific research design.

Locus of control and self-concept are other variables which might be expected to demonstrate a relationship with writing behavior. Albert (1981) researched whether structured versus non-structured journal writing would affect self-concept and locus of control. The experimental group participated in a structured journal writing program consisting of various exercises designed to promote growth and awareness; the control group had no program or format for their journal writing. While Albert failed to attain significant differences in the experimental group, their written reactions to the experiment more frequently included the comment that in general, they had benefited from the experience.

Torian (1977) hypothesized that creative writing could enhance the development of a more positive self-image in middle school children. The results of his study, which utilized pre-and post tests and experimental and control groups, supported hishypothesis. He concluded that the development of a more positive self-image in elementary aged children can be achieved through a creative writing program.

If writing has the potential to effect positive personality growth, then one might infer that it has therapeutic potential as well. Phillips, Gershenson, and Lyons (1977) obtained reliable gains in a group of college students who volunteered to participate in a writing therapy experiment. Subjects were administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality

Inventory and the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, both at the beginning and end of the study. The authors concluded that writing therapy procedures were associated with reliable test-retest psychometric changes.

Adams (1981) studied writing as a counseling technique in a high school setting. The experimental groups engaged in a writing process for six weeks with counselors who responded to the students in writing. The results of Adams' study revealed that "the writing group received the kind of help by way of the writing process that satisfied the developmental goals which they had identified" (p. 1).

The success of studies such as those conducted by Phillips et al. and Adams should not be assumed to imply that writing as a therapeutic tool can ever replace face-to-face counseling. Rather, it would seem that following further empirical research, writing may come to be viewed as one of a number of potentially helpful techniques which complement personal counseling.

If writing can be correlated with personality growth and higher levels of identity status, then is the obverse also true? That is, are those who write reluctantly and with great difficulty likely to be in lower levels of identity status and demonstrating less personality growth? Daly and Wilson (1981) summarized the results of 12 studies conducted in the last decade which related writing apprehension to a variety of measures of self-esteem and personality. The findings of these studies indicated that writing "apprehension is inversely related to self-esteem, marginally related to some personality measures. . .and positively correlated with attitudes toward oral communication and reading" (p. 1). Based on the findings of these studies, it would appear that writing apprehension precludes the gains to be derived from communing with self through writing.

The act of writing, by its very nature, brings about a certain solitude, an opportunity to at least "listen to oneself" (Rogers, cited in DiCaprio, 1974, p. 377). This solitude has been referred to by others. Green (1982) speaks of "creative solitude." Blanchot (1982) quoted the poet Rilke:

> For weeks now--save for two brief interludes--
> I have not spoken a single word; my solitude
> has finally closed in and I am contained in
> my work like a kernel in its fruit. (p. 97)

Blanchot believed that Rilke referred to a "solitude which is not essentially solitude, but rather self-communion. . . the solitude of what only the word 'being' can express" (p. 97-98).

Those who have leapt from their beds to record a creative insight, lest it be lost, would agree that writing is self-communion. While the research thus far is inconclusive with regard to what forms of writing (e.g., creative, journal keeping) are most conducive to self-communion, and hence personality growth, it appears that in many instances, some form of writing is a useful tool for bringing the real and ideal selves into congruence. And if--as the research suggests--it has value as a therapeutic tool as well, then writing may increasingly come to be recognized for its potential role in personality development.

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